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U.S. to Airlift Archive of Atrocities Out of Iraq

Tons of Material Said to Document Massacre of Tens of Thousands of Kurds

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The U.S. military is preparing to airlift out of northern Iraq a voluminous archive of secret police files that document widespread atrocities against ethnic Kurds by the Baghdad government, according to Kurdish and American participants.

An estimated 27 tons of documents, videotapes and cassette recordings, captured by Kurdish rebels from provincial police and secret service headquarters in an uprising last year, have been gathered along the Turkish border and could depart for the United States by way of Incirlik Air Base in Turkey as early as today, according to government and non-government sources.

Kurdish officials and Western human rights campaigners said the archive documents the systematic razing of villages and the torture and murder of tens of thousands of Kurds. The advocates said they hope to use the evidence in prosecutions of responsible Iraqis, perhaps under the 1948 United Nations convention on genocide, but it is unclear whether the Bush administration—or any other government—is interested in pursuing such a trial.

The principal brokers of the delicate operation appear to have been the New York-based Human Rights Watch, which said it will take temporary custody of the Iraqi archive, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which sent a senior aide to negotiate with Kurdish leaders and intervened repeatedly to secure U.S. military transport through months of interagency Bush administration disputes.

Committee Chairman Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), whose father, Herbert Pell, was U.S. representative to the war crimes commission that collected evidence against Nazi Germany, yesterday likened the Iraqi "slaughter of the Kurds" to the Holocaust of the Jews during World War II.

"These documents . . . could well support hauling Iraq before some international tribunal on the charges of crimes against humanity or genocide," Pell said.

Kenneth Roth, deputy director of Human Rights Watch, said the comparison to Hitler's Germany appears to be justified by the scale of the atrocities and the meticulous detail of records about them.

He said researchers would spend months "organizing, cataloguing and microfilming the documents" in an effort that the Library of Congress estimated would cost $5 million. Exactly what will become of the materials appeared to be undecided yesterday.

Disclosure in Sunday's New York Times at first appeared to imperil the delicate enterprise.

Andrew Whitley, executive director of Middle East Watch, said in an interview early yesterday in northern Iraq that the press report "could sabotage the whole operation." Middle East Watch is part of Human Rights Watch, an independent monitoring group.

Two of four Kurdish parties holding the documents—the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Kurdistan Socialist Party—immediately suggested they might withhold the files in their possession.

But a third party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan led by Jalal Talabani, the only party firmly committed to the operation, began broadcasting radio and television reports citing the transfer of documents as evidence of the party's close U.S. ties. The broadcasts came on the eve of elections scheduled for Tuesday in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Political maneuvering aside, U.S. military officials feared that Iraq might try to attack the Kurdish trucks that brought the archive to a staging area near the Turkish border. But the assembly was completed without incident late yesterday and air transport to Incirlik was expected to begin shortly.

Long-term options for the material, discussed in months of talks, include deposit with the National Archives, the Library of Congress, Human Rights Watch or a private foundation.

Gellman reported from Washington, Randal from Shaqlawa in Kurdish-held northern Iraq.